

Coal studied as source of gas

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Abstract:

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Full Text:

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Researchers could be getting closer to developing a way to affordably convert coal into gasoline and diesel so it could be sold at prices competitive with fuels derived from crude oil.

University of Kentucky professor Gerald Huffman said fuel from coal could be available in service stations in the U.S. within 15 years. Huffman, head of a consortium of researchers at five universities, said the project could help cut the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

The research is important to coal-producing states such as Kentucky because it would provide an additional market for the burnable mineral that's now largely used in electric-generating plants.

University President Lee T. Todd Jr. said ramifications of the research has the potential to reach far beyond Kentucky.

"This research is relevant in many ways, quite notably to national security, in view of the fact that most of the major world oil suppliers are located in the Middle East," he said.

Technology has been available for decades to convert coal into motor fuels, but the cost has been far greater than that of refining crude.

The Department of Energy has awarded the UK Consortium for Fossil Fuel Science a \$5.7 million grant to develop cheaper methods to make the conversion.

The consortium also is looking at ways to more affordably convert natural gas to motor fuels. The consortium includes researchers from West Virginia and Auburn Universities and the Universities of Pittsburgh and Utah. Researchers at each are working on different aspects of the project.

John Winslow, coal fuels manager for the Department of Energy's National Energy Technology Laboratory in Pittsburgh, said he believes production of gasoline, diesel and jet fuel from coal could begin in the U.S. between 2010 and 2015.

"South Africa has been making this type of fuel since the mid- 1950s," Winslow said. "But to deploy it in the United States, we need to drive down the costs."

The cost of producing the fuels from coal is nearly twice that of crude oil using current technologies. Huffman said fuels derived from coal would burn with up to 90 percent less emissions than the same fuels refined from crude oil.

The process removes the impurities that escape through exhaust pipes into the atmosphere. That's important, Huffman said, because diesel exhaust accounts for some 60 percent of the airborne particulates that cause the haze in urban skies.

Huffman said several oil companies are considering building plants to produce cleaner-burning gasoline and diesel from natural gas. He said they could be producing fuels in five to 10 years.

"Once we have put together these plants that would rely on natural gas as a feedstock, then we see coal coming in the next round," he said.

Winslow said coal may hold the key to the nation's fuel needs, especially when the world's oil reserves begin to decline and prices begin to rise.

[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO: Naresh Shah, a researcher with the University of Kentucky Consortium for Fossil Fuel Science, prepares a hydrogen- powered model. The consortium is studying alternative fuels.

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